

COUNTY BOUGHT COPTER FOR UNNEEDED SPRAYING

Freeholders spent \$1 million for extra chopper

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By August 2002, the vexing battle between humans and gypsy moths in New Jersey had long been settled.

A scourge of the 1970s and '80s, the chomping pest that had defoliated hundreds of thousands of Garden State acres had been largely eliminated by the mid-1990s, thanks to a naturally occurring fungus that continues to thrive.

So why, in 2002, did Monmouth County purchase a spanking new helicopter for \$1 million, ostensibly to spray pesticide on gypsy moths, an enemy it had already vanquished?

And why, in the two years since, has the aircraft, which costs more than \$30,000 a year to spraying.

Still, Wolfe defends the need for the helicopter and argues that the aircraft is not used for frivolous reasons.

"We've kept strict control and we don't overuse the helicopter," Wolfe said.

Indeed, the helicopter has only been flown 270 hours since it was delivered to the county in 2002, a figure that translates to an average of approximately nine hours per month.

Does such limited use justify the \$1 million price tag, the additional \$30,000 spent for maintenance, fuel and hangar space, and future upkeep costs?

"If we find one missing child or Alzheimer's patient, it's worth it," said Kirschenbaum, the chief of detectives in the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office. "We're an innovative and progressive county and we use all the tools at our disposal."

Kirschenbaum also said the county has requested the State Police provide a helicopter several times only to find there was none available.

"Because it's right here in Monmouth County, we can put the helicopter in the air in 15 minutes," he said, adding that the helicopter proved an invaluable tool several years ago during a child kidnapping in Spring Lake.

Kirschenbaum said the helicopter's purchase price and upkeep must be considered a long-term investment that spans the life of the aircraft, which is typically 25 to 30 years.



(STAFF PHOTO: DAVE MAY)

The mosquito commission's copter (shown) and the one assigned to the Shade Tree Commission are both kept at Monmouth Executive Airport.



(STAFF PHOTOS: MICHAEL J. TREOLA)

Pilot Brian Gosnell and Bruce Campbell (right) stand outside the hangar for the two helicopters owned by Monmouth County.



The cockpit of the county's other helicopter, used by the Mosquito Extermination Commission, is shown at the airport.

Harry J. Conover Jr., the coordinator of the Monmouth County Office of Emergency Management, said his department also uses the shade tree helicopter to survey the coast for beach erosion and storm damage, which leads to beach replenishment money for the county from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

State Police available

But such aerial surveillance and photography for law enforcement purposes is rare or nonexistent outside Monmouth County, according to officials in several other New Jersey counties.

Lt. Robert Urie of the Ocean County Prosecutor's Office said his department "very rarely" needs to take aerial photographs and when it does, contacts the State Police.

"I can't remember the last time we needed to go up (in a helicopter)," Urie said.

"(A helicopter) is a luxury we can't afford," said Dennis Watson, chief of detectives in the Middlesex County Prosecutor's Office. "If we had a specific need for aerial surveillance, we would contact the State Police."

The State Police has several helicopters available for law enforcement purposes, according to Capt. Rick Arroyo, the bureau chief for the aviation unit of the New Jersey State Police.

Arroyo said the department grants all requests from law enforcement agencies for surveillance flights.

"If (the request) comes from a municipal, county or federal agency, and we have a ship (helicopter) available, we'll assist," Arroyo said. "But we haven't had such a request in more than a month."

Arroyo said the State Police does not charge the requesting agency for use of the helicopter or pilot, but considers the service "part of our patrol."

Ocean County Undersheriff Wayne R. Rupert said the Ocean County Office of Emergency Management has an agreement with a "group of gentlemen who call themselves the Ocean Air Support Squadron" who volunteer their time and their personal planes for emergency missions.

"It's a great service . . . a real win-win for us and them," he said of the group, who are reimbursed by the county for the cost of gas and oil but are not paid for their time or equipment.

Rupert said the county uses the services of the volunteer group to film the county coastline every spring, and to document the damage done by winter storms.

Rupert said there are no helicopters among the volunteer aircraft and that, when one is needed, the Office of Emergency Management will request use of a county mosquito commission helicopter — Ocean County has two for mosquito spraying — or contact State Police.

Officials in Burlington and Union counties said they have no county helicopters.

Camden County has one helicopter operated by its sheriff's office, a Vietnam-era "Huey" it received for free from the U.S. Department of Defense in 1998, according to Camden County spokesman Ronald L. Tomasello.

But this year the county grounded it to save the annual \$30,000 in maintenance, fuel and hangar charges.

"We also found the state police helicopter is also available to us for these purposes," Tomasello said.

One of the major reasons Monmouth County operates two helicopters, officials contend, is because the different spray equipment needed for mosquito and gypsy moth pesticide cannot be installed on the

same helicopter.

"My spray system is certified for my aircraft," said Brian Gosnell, the pilot of the shade tree commission's helicopter. "You cannot take one spray system and put it on another." Gosnell, a full-time employee of the mosquito commission, directs several weed-control road crews when not flying the helicopter.

Both Wolfe and shade tree commission superintendent Smith agree with Gosnell, contending the two spray systems cannot be interchanged on a single helicopter.

But Dan Riley, a pilot at AgRotors, a Pennsylvania company that has provided aerial spraying of agricultural and pesticide products since 1957 and is contracted to perform spraying for numerous federal agencies, said the company routinely changes the spraying equipment on its helicopters to accommodate liquid and pellet-type products.

"We have 18 helicopters here that we use for mosquitoes, gypsy moth, black fly and other spraying, and we change the equipment all the time," Riley said.

He said it requires about a day to alter a helicopter from a liquid-type spraying apparatus to a dry or pellet-type.

"Why go out and buy another helicopter when you can switch back and forth?" he said.

FAA regulations do not permit a helicopter fitted with spraying equipment to be used for any other purpose, Riley said.

"But if it's an emergency, I don't think (the FAA) would object" to leaving the equipment on, he said. Riley said the equipment would not affect maneuverability or safety.

Another option to helicopter ownership is rental.

Ben Litton, who operates Ascent Helicopters, which flies out of Jackson, said 60 percent of his business is ferrying aerial photographers. The cost for a rental of a helicopter is \$350 per hour, he said, with a maximum of three passengers per flight.

Based on the number of hours the Monmouth County shade tree helicopter was flown in 2004 (not including maintenance flights), the yearly cost of renting a helicopter from Ascent would be \$26,775, or about \$6,000 less than the cost of servicing, fueling and storing the county helicopter in 2004.

It all makes at least one county taxpayer shrug.

"What are you gonna do?" asked Richard Brawer of Ocean Township when told of the helicopter's costs.

"Now that we have the helicopter, we might as well keep it," he said of the \$1 million aircraft. "We probably wouldn't get \$200,000 for trading it in."

Still, Brawer said he can't help but think the helicopter purchase is a case of careless spending.

"There's so much waste in government," he said. "The best we can do is try to keep an eye on it."

Staff writer James W. Prado Roberts contributed to this story.